United Nations CEDAW/C/SR.1257

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.: General
4 November 2014

English only

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Fifty-ninth session

Summary record of the 1257th meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 28 October 2014, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Ameline

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Seventh periodic report of Belgium (CEDAW/C/BEL/7; CEDAW/C/BEL/Q/7 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Belgium took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Pasteel** (Belgium), introducing the seventh periodic report of Belgium (CEDAW/C/BEL/7), said that his Government had adopted several pieces of legislation intended to combat gender-based discrimination and to promote respect for gender equality. The Civil Code had been amended in 2014 to guarantee equal rights of women and men to transmit their family names to their children, in accordance with the Committee's recommendation, allowing parents to choose whether a child would bear the father's or mother's surname, or both surnames in the order that the parents chose. Adoptive parents had the same options under the law. Couples or adoptive parents who already had children could also benefit from the new law, subject to certain conditions.

3. Each of the regional governments had at least one gender focal point. As part of its efforts to ensure the effective implementation of its anti-discrimination legislation, Belgium had taken steps to improve its procedure for dealing with complaints of gender-based discrimination. Moreover, under a 2013 joint circular on discrimination and hate crimes of the Minister of Justice, Minister of Internal Affairs and the Belgian College of Prosecutors General, prosecutor's offices were required to record all cases of gender-based discrimination.

4. A new law criminalizing sexism had entered into force in August 2014. The law provided that any person behaving in a flagrantly sexist manner could be called to appear before the courts or incur a prison sentence or a fine. The fight against sexism was closely linked to the fight against gender stereotypes. In that connection, the Flemish authorities had launched the Genderklik awareness-raising campaign, which was aimed at raising public awareness of the impact of gender on everyday situations through a variety of projects and activities. Campaigns to raise awareness of and to combat gender stereotypes had also been launched in schools and in cooperation with the media in the French Community. In the Brussels-Capital Region, campaigns against gender stereotypes, sexism and harassment had also been launched.

5. Several pieces of legislation on gender mainstreaming had been adopted or were in the process of being adopted. The legislation in question was based on the 2007 federal law on gender mainstreaming and was binding upon all relevant ministries, departments and authorities. In 2008, the Flemish authorities had established a set of objectives relating to equal opportunities and required ministers to promote equal opportunities in their respective areas of competence. Belgium had made significant progress in collecting statistics disaggregated by sex and in developing gender indicators. Efforts to collect data would continue, as having a clear understanding of the gender disparities in Belgian society was essential for successfully mainstreaming gender perspectives into public policies.

6. Belgium had given effect to the Committee's general recommendation No. 19 on violence against women by implementing a comprehensive national strategy to combat all forms of such violence. A national action plan to combat partner violence, forced marriage, violence committed in the name of honour and female genital mutilation for the period 2010–2014 had been adopted in November 2010 and had received international recognition. The national action plan had been reviewed in June 2013 and a working group on sexual violence had been set up to prepare the next plan. Furthermore, Belgium expected to

complete the process of ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in the near future and to use it as the basis for the next national action plan. Belgium also intended to take better account of the vulnerability of some groups of women, such as migrant women and women with disabilities, when devising measures to combat violence against women and domestic violence. However, despite the raft of measures taken in recent years, many victims were still reluctant to report acts of violence and to seek assistance. Efforts had been undertaken at all levels of the country to raise the awareness of the public and certain target groups of the need to report acts of violence, and to assist the victims of violence. Those efforts had included the launching of prevention campaigns, the setting up of hotlines, the development of websites and the dissemination of brochures. Moreover, appropriate training had been provided to professionals working the judicial, health-care and psychosocial sectors. A support centre for combating partner violence had been set up in Wallonia in 2014. Belgium was working to increase the number of shelters available to women who were victims of domestic violence. A special shelter for women had been set up in the Brussels-Capital Region in 2014.

7. A number of laws had been passed in 2013 to crack down further on human trafficking. The definition of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation had been broadened; the exploitation of begging and prostitution and human trafficking carried harsher penalties, depending on the number of victims; and buildings which had been used for the purposes of human trafficking or the exploitation of prostitution were now explicitly subject to confiscation under the law. Furthermore, the second national action plan to combat human trafficking, which covered the period 2012–2014, was currently being implemented.

8. The results of the elections held in May 2014 had demonstrated the effectiveness of the laws on parity in electoral lists. Currently, women accounted for at least 40 per cent of the members of parliamentary assemblies. Moreover, women made up for around 30 per cent of the members of the newly elected regional governments. Most authorities had adopted temporary special measures to increase the participation of women in management and decision-making bodies in 2007. A major campaign to promote the equal participation of men and women in decision-making bodies had been launched in the French Community in March 2014.

9. The three Communities combated gender stereotypes and promoted gender equality in schools through textbooks and providing teachers with continuous training on gender issues. Moreover, a master's programme on gender and diversity had been launched in Flanders.

10. The Federal Government had been increasingly effective in mainstreaming gender perspectives into employment policies as a matter of priority. Another priority was the need to reduce the gender wage gap in the country. In that connection, a special task force responsible for overseeing the effective implementation of the 2012 law concerning the gender wage gap had been set up. Belgium had met the majority of the Barcelona objectives on the development of childcare facilities and would continue its efforts to guarantee all children under the age of 2 a place in a good-quality, affordable childcare establishment.

11. The Federal Government had improved access to contraception and had made certain contraceptives free for persons under 21 years of age. A considerable number of initiatives to raise awareness of sexual and reproductive rights had also been carried out.

12. Civil society organizations were widely consulted either through formal consultative bodies or on an ad hoc basis on matters concerning them. Furthermore, a Royal Decree of 21 July 2014 provided that three specialized NGOs responsible for providing care to

victims of human trafficking were to be included in the national coordination mechanism to combat that phenomenon. Civil society organizations had been consulted during the preparation of the State party's report and the recommendations contained in their alternative reports had also been taken into account. While Belgium had made significant progress in promoting respect for women's rights and eliminating gender-based discrimination, much remained to be done.

Articles 1 to 6

13. **The Chairperson**, speaking in her capacity as an expert, said that, while the Belgian Constitution enshrined the principles of equality before the law and non-discrimination, it made no specific reference to the exhaustive definition of discrimination against women contained in article 1 of the Convention. The State party was to be commended on the legislative measures that it had taken to combat discrimination in general. However, she would be interested to know whether the State party intended to take measures at the federal level to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in all sectors. She asked how the State party ensured legal coherence between the different levels of government, the federal and regional parliaments and the different courts; whether there were plans to grant the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men the status of an independent national human rights institution in accordance with the Paris Principles; whether the State party planned to incorporate the Convention more fully into its domestic legal order; and what measures the State party had taken to combat discrimination against minority women, including female migrants.

14. **Ms. Šimonović**, recalling that several failed attempts had been made to incorporate into law a general principle designed to give treaties the same standing as the provisions of internal law, said the fact that the Court of Cassation had confirmed the primacy of the provisions of international treaties directly affecting internal law over the provisions of national law was a welcome development. However, it was clear that judges needed to have in-depth knowledge of international law to apply those provisions correctly. She asked whether judges, prosecutors and lawyers were provided with training on the Convention and its Optional Protocol and whether there was a body responsible for challenging laws that ran counter to the Convention.

15. **Ms. Pomeranzi** said that there appeared to be problems with the general functioning of the national machinery for the advancement of women. A number of programmes addressing key areas of concern to women had been launched but there seemed to be little coordination between them. Moreover, the overall strategy for mainstreaming a gender perspective appeared to be fragmented. She asked whether the Institute for Equality between Women and Men was a truly independent body. She requested clarification on the role played by technical bodies such as the Institute for Equality between Women and Men and that played by the federal authorities in framing gender-related policies.

16. **Mr. De Crombrugghe** (Belgium) said that it was the prerogative of the Belgian State to determine its internal organization. While the Convention applied to the whole of the national territory, the country's unique composition and the fact that political power was divided among the different federated entities of the country meant that the Convention could not be implemented in the same way in each region.

17. **Ms. Gallant** (Belgium) said that the work to establish a national human rights mechanism, which had begun under the previous Federal Government, was continuing under the newly-elected Federal Government. The mandate of the national human rights mechanism would cover certain aspects of the work done, inter alia, by the Centre for Equality of Opportunity and the Struggle against Racism and Discrimination and the Federal Centre for the Analysis of Migration Flows, the Protection of the Fundamental Rights of Foreigners and the Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings. The national

human rights mechanism would also deal with issues relating to the rights of the child and to the rights of persons with disabilities. However, a draft cooperation agreement establishing the national human rights mechanism had yet to be concluded.

18. Judges, prosecutors and lawyers had not been provided with specific training on the Convention itself but had received training on a range of related topics, such as gender-based discrimination, violence against women, forced marriage, human trafficking and female genital mutilation.

19. In Belgium, the provisions of international conventions did not need to be incorporated directly into the national legal framework to be valid. A judge could decide to disregard a domestic provision if it ran counter to a provision of an international convention ratified by Belgium. The national courts were responsible for deciding whether a provision of an international convention was directly applicable or not. Many pieces of existing legislation already upheld the rights enshrined in the Convention. In practice, domestic provisions or provisions of European Union law were invoked more often than those of the Convention.

20. **Mr. Pasteel** (Belgium) said that the 2007 federal law on gender mainstreaming would be reviewed in the near future. The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men had been established in accordance with European Union directives and was an independent body tasked with assisting victims of gender-based discrimination, handling complaints and conducting research in the area of gender equality. Moreover, the Institute could issue opinions and recommendations. The Institute had also concluded cooperation agreements with different federated entities in an attempt to better coordinate efforts to promote gender equality.

21. **Ms. Adriaenssens** (Belgium) said that the French Community had adopted a decree aimed at combating certain forms of discrimination in 2008. The French Community had also concluded a cooperation agreement with the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men. Under the cooperation agreement, the Institute could deal with complaints of discrimination, provide training to public officials and issue opinions or recommendations to the French Community authorities.

22. **Ms. Gallant** (Belgium) said that the Council of State reviewed bills to ensure that they were in line with the provisions of the Convention. The Constitutional Court was responsible for reviewing the implementation of national legislation and ensuring its compliance with the State party's international legal obligations.

23. **Ms. Joly** (Belgium) said that a federal approach to gender equality had been developed in which all federal ministries participated. The federal gender action plan provided for a series of measures to promote gender parity, including protocols, handbooks and circulars. The Federal Government had made significant progress in collecting national data disaggregated by sex and had introduced an evaluation mechanism which identified any persisting weaknesses or gaps in its data-collection methods.

24. **Ms. Smisdom** (Belgium) said that the Flemish Region had established gender mainstreaming mechanisms and indicators and took account of gender considerations in its regional policies.

25. **Ms. Schulz** congratulated the State party on its use of non-sexist terminology in domestic legislation and asked what steps had been taken to ensure that the language used in national policies promoted the participation of women in all areas of public and political life, including the labour market.

26. **Ms. Pomeranzi** asked whether sufficient federal and regional financial and human resources had been allocated to the national machinery for the advancement of women and requested further information on the coordination between the Institute for the Equality of

Women and Men and the ministries dealing with issues relating to the empowerment of women for purposes of gender mainstreaming at both the federal and regional levels.

27. **Ms. Neubauer** asked what steps had been taken to raise awareness among parliamentarians of the provisions of the Convention and the Committee's general recommendations and encourage them to attend the State party's constructive dialogue with the Committee.

28. **Ms. Šimonović** asked the delegation to provide concrete information on the steps taken to integrate the content and main principles of the Convention into national law as well as examples of any court decisions directly invoking the Convention. She also wished to know whether the provisions of the Convention and Optional Protocol were integrated into training and awareness-raising programmes for judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

29. **Mr. Pasteel** (Belgium) said the Government had taken measures to ensure that the language used in gender policies promoted equality and refrained from reinforcing negative gender stereotypes. The national gender mainstreaming law of 2007 provided for a regular analysis of the impact of public policy on gender equality and encouraged gender-specific language in national legislation and policy, particularly in regard to employment, in order to reduce gender inequalities.

30. **Ms. Joly** (Belgium) said that the delegation would provide the Committee with a detailed breakdown of federal budget allocations for gender equality at a later date. By way of example, she said that the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men received annual funding of around €5 million, around half of which was set aside for staff expenditure. Each federal ministry had its own budget line and organized training programmes on gender mainstreaming. The Federal Government had also recently published a circular for all federal ministries which contained detailed advice on budgetary resources for gender issues. As for the availability of national data disaggregated by sex, the Federal Government had published brochures containing a number of gender indicators which showed trends in gender equality, and had established a working group within the High Council of Statistics which was responsible for devising recommendations to enhance the coherence of data collection at federal and regional levels.

31. **Ms. Adriaenssens** (Belgium) said that efforts had been made in the Walloon Region to evaluate the impact of language used in regional policies on gender equality. Steps had also been taken to encourage women parliamentarians to attend and participate in the State party's constructive dialogue with the Committee.

32. **Ms. Joly** (Belgium) said that the Federal Government regularly discussed the Committee's concluding observations and general recommendations and devised effective implementation measures.

33. **Ms. Gallant** (Belgium) said that, as European legislation contained extensive safeguards against sexual discrimination and gender inequality, women victims of sexual discrimination or abuse therefore tended to invoke its provisions rather than those of the Convention when bringing cases before the courts. Similarly, women in Belgium had so far not had recourse to complaints under the Optional Protocol, as they had been able to obtain redress using domestic remedies.

34. **Ms. Neubauer** asked whether the Federal Government had incorporated special temporary measures into its national gender mainstreaming law of 2007 so as to accelerate de facto equality between men and women in all areas. She also wished to know whether special temporary measures had been implemented at the federal and regional level for disadvantaged groups of women, including rural women, women with disabilities and women from ethnic and religious minorities. As for the Flemish Community's recent study on affirmative action, she enquired as to whether steps had been taken to raise awareness of

special temporary measures and promote their use in federal and regional policies, in accordance with article 4 of the Convention. Lastly, she requested further information regarding the provisions and implementation status of legislation adopted in 2010 to promote the participation of women on the boards of public and publicly listed companies.

35. **Ms. Acar** asked whether, as recommended by the Committee in its previous concluding observations (CEDAW/C/BEL/CO/6), the State party had undertaken research into all forms of violence against immigrant, refugee and minority women and girls, including female genital mutilation and, if so, what had been the outcome of that research. She also wished to know what steps had been taken towards the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and whether the State party intended to submit any reservations thereto. She stressed the importance of establishing systematic and regular collection and analysis of data and information on all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence and sexual harassment, disaggregated by sex, type of violence and relationship between victim and perpetrator, and urged the State party to review its gender-neutral approach to violence, given that such an approach undermined the fact that women continued to be disproportionately affected by violence in the public and private spheres. Lastly, she enquired as to whether efforts would be made to ensure that sexual abuse was qualified under the Criminal Code as a crime against the person rather than as an offence against public morality and family order.

36. **Ms. Gabr** asked what measures had been taken to combat racism and discrimination against vulnerable groups of women such as migrant women. She also wished to know whether research had been carried out on the impact of the regulations and by-laws of schools, public hospitals, local authorities and private enterprises banning the use of headscarves, in particular on access by women and girls to education and employment opportunities, and whether measures had been taken to eliminate any discriminatory consequences of such a ban. Lastly, she enquired as to whether safeguards had been put in place to protect women asylum seekers and undocumented women who had been victims of domestic violence so that they could report cases without fear of being deported from the State party.

37. **Ms. Šimonović** asked whether the State party had taken specific steps to integrate the main concepts and principles of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence into national law and bring the definition of rape contained in its Criminal Code into line with the provisions of that Convention. She also wished to know whether shelters for victims of domestic violence received State funding and took in migrant women as well as Belgian nationals. Lastly, she requested additional data on partner violence and on the number of women killed by their partners, including information on the prosecutions, convictions and sentences imposed on perpetrators.

38. **Ms. Jahan** asked whether the Federal Government had established a mechanism to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the National Plan of Action to Combat Human Trafficking adopted in 2008 and had allocated resources to programmes and plans for preventing and combating human trafficking. She also wished to know whether the State party intended to grant special protection, including temporary residence permits, to victims of trafficking, even when they were unwilling or unable to cooperate with the legal authorities.

39. **Ms. Leinarte** asked whether the State party had taken steps to establish a strategy to reduce demand for prostitution in accordance with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol), and whether it had carried out surveys to collect data on sex workers in the country

disaggregated by gender, ethnic origin and nationality. Were rehabilitation and reintegration programmes available for women wishing to leave prostitution?

40. **Mr. Pasteel** (Belgium) said that, while a royal decree that was supposed to put in place temporary special measures at the federal level in accordance with the 2007 law on gender mainstreaming had not been issued during the previous legislative period, the decree would be taken into account during the Government review of the law and equal opportunity policy and issued under the current legislature.

41. **Ms. Vandenbossche** (Belgium) said that the Flemish Authority had carried out a study on temporary special measures which sought to clarify what was meant by and the legal scope of such measures. For example, rather than quotas, the Flemish Authority referred to "targets". One such target was to have 10 per cent of persons working in public administration come from minority backgrounds. Another was the level of reasonable accommodation for women with disabilities to be provided by employers.

42. **Ms. Joly** (Belgium), responding to the question on whether the 2011 Act concerning women's participation in the boards of directors of listed companies and autonomous public enterprises was applied uniformly to regions and communities, said that it applied only to federal public enterprises. However, virtually all the federated entities had set a one-third quota for the top management of public enterprises. All levels of government also had quotas for the advisory bodies of the entities.

43. **Ms. Gillain** (Belgium) said that the Walloon Region had adopted three decrees in January 2014 providing for a one-third quota on the boards of non-profit organizations and homes for older people approved by the Region.

44. **Ms. Vandenbossche** (Belgium), referring to efforts to combat stereotypes of women from ethnic minorities, said that the not-for-profit organization Ella, which focused on the emancipation and empowerment of women and girls with migrant backgrounds, created teaching aids and organized debates on issues such as mixed relationships and marriage migration. Every year, some 15,000 new migrants were enrolled in civic orientation courses that included gender-related themes such as spousal violence and the prohibition of female genital mutilation in Belgium. The Ministry for Equality of Opportunity, in cooperation with NGOs, had set up a project to stimulate dialogue between girls and boys from ethnic minorities in order to create gender awareness and change gender stereotypes.

45. **Ms. Adriaenssens** (Belgium) said that there was no law banning headscarves or conspicuous religious symbols in public schools in the French Community and it was for individual schools to draw up their own dress codes. Nor was there any legislation regulating the issue in alternative education networks.

46. **Ms. Vandenbossche** (Belgium) said that, since September 2013, there had been a ban on wearing religious insignia of any kind in official educational institutions owned by the Flemish Community and funded by the Flemish Government. In subsidized public schools organized by municipalities or provinces and subsidized free schools, including Catholic schools, it was for the school administration to decide. However, following a recent judgement by the Council of State, the debate had been reopened with respect to the official educational establishments. A Sikh student who had not been permitted to wear his patka had brought his case to the Council of State, claiming a violation of his freedom of religion, and the Council had nullified the ban in that specific school, although the general ban remained in place.

47. **Mr. Belkacemi** (Belgium) said that violence against women was a cross-cutting issue in Belgium. The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men coordinated activities in that area and brought together all federal, regional and community departments to develop a joint approach under the national plan of action concerning violence between

partners and other types of domestic violence. There had been no national studies on violence against migrant women specifically, although a more general study on violence against women had been carried out in 2010. There was a range of specific activities for migrant women on a variety of issues, including female genital mutilation, forced marriage and honour crimes. For example, a brochure with comprehensive information on rights and available services, including special helplines, for victims of domestic violence had been published in 17 languages and widely distributed. The State party's policy on female genital mutilation was extremely proactive. There were now two centres — in Brussels and Ghent — for victims of female genital mutilation, providing a wide range of services. Other tools for addressing the problem included awareness-raising activities in hospitals, training for doctors and a guide for lawyers. There had been two studies on the prevalence of female genital mutilation in Belgium. According to the 2012 figures, it was estimated that more than 13,000 girls and women living in Belgium had most probably undergone female genital mutilation and a further 4,000 were at risk. The increase in figures between 2008 and 2012 was attributable to the increase in migrants from countries in which the practice was widespread.

48. **Ms. Gallant** (Belgium) said that, as the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence required ratification at the federal, community and regional level and given the number of parliamentary assemblies in Belgium, the ratification process necessarily took some time. However, most of the authorities had already adopted decrees approving ratification. At the federal level, the corresponding bill had been finalized and would soon be submitted to the Government. With regard to the criminal classification of sexual abuse, the fact that sexual violence currently came under a broad title of the Criminal Code, did not in any way detract from the priority attached to prosecuting such offences. The Federal Government had recently decided to review and modernize the Criminal Code and would be considering the reclassification of sexual violence in the process. The State party continued to enact laws against sexual offences as needed; for example, two new laws had recently been adopted to protect minors against solicitation for sexual purposes and online grooming.

49. Rape was criminalized under the Criminal Code and the relevant provision stated that all acts of sexual penetration, of any nature and by whatever means, committed against a non-consenting person constituted rape; aggravating circumstances were provided for in cases involving the rape of a minor. With regard to murder in the context of domestic violence, some 470 cases had been brought before the courts between 2011 and 2013. The Interdepartmental Coordination Unit for the Fight against Trafficking in Persons, headed by the Minister of Justice, brought together all political and operational stakeholders at the federal level and was responsible for developing and monitoring the implementation of national plans of action in that area. A bureau made up of the main services involved in combating trafficking in persons met every month and developed initiatives and recommendations.

50. Regarding the link between prostitution and trafficking in persons, the Belgian definition of trafficking was one of the broadest in the world and covered trafficking for a variety of purposes, including sexual and economic exploitation, which were considered aggravating circumstances rather than actual elements of the crime. There were no plans to criminalize prostitution as such or to criminalize clients. A working group on trafficking had considered the issue but had ultimately decided it was not appropriate for a number of reasons, including the fact that clients had agreed to testify in a number of cases of trafficking and thus deciding to prosecute clients might be counterproductive. There were, however, specific provisions concerning minors and penalties for clients who went to underage prostitutes.

51. **Ms. Hautot** (Belgium) said that approximately 19 per cent of the asylum applications considered in 2013 had contained claims on gender-related grounds. Refugee status had been granted to almost 900 persons who had filed claims on the grounds of forced marriage, 775 who had feared female genital mutilation personally or against a daughter and 105 persons who had feared an honour crime. Approximately 500 girls were being monitored under the follow-up mechanism to ensure the physical integrity of girls who had been granted refugee status on the grounds of fear of female genital mutilation. There were special brochures in various languages on the asylum procedure for women and girls. A residence permit could be requested exceptionally by women who were the victims of violence or were in a state of vulnerability. Residence permits obtained in the context of family reunification would not be withdrawn from women who were victims of domestic violence and were no longer with the person with whom they had been reunited. The principle of non-refoulement also applied in such cases.

52. Victims of human trafficking were not obliged to cooperate in order to receive protection and assistance. They had a period of 45 days in which to decide whether to accept victim status. If victims decided to cooperate, they were not obliged to appear as witnesses. Even if victim status had not been granted, they could still apply for residency or asylum on humanitarian grounds. The shelters for minor victims of trafficking were specialized and always place the best interests of the child first and worked with the minor's guardian.

53. **Ms. Smisdom** (Belgium) said that the authorities were aware that migrant women were overrepresented at women's refuges. The Flemish authorities had put in place a whole system of safeguards and services for victims of domestic violence that were readily accessible. Efforts were being made to address the problem in migrant communities in particular.

54. **Ms. Gillain** (Belgium) said that the Walloon Region funded 15 shelters for women victims of violence from all backgrounds. The shelters, which provided a 24-hour service, must always have at least two beds available for emergency cases.

55. **Ms. Absil** (Belgium) said that there were 14 shelters in the Brussels-Capital Region, some of which provided accommodation to women with children. One of the centres, with a capacity for 24 persons, was exclusively for victims of violence.

56. **Ms. Acar** asked about the reasons for the low reporting rate and conviction rate for sexual abuse. She expressed concern that, in practice, it was very difficult for migrant women who were the victims of violence to obtain their own residence permits independently of their spouse. She also asked the delegation to comment on reports that when called on to deal with cases of domestic violence, the police often asked about immigration status instead of immediately dealing with the victim.

57. **Ms. Gabr** welcomed the fact that the debate on wearing headscarves was being reopened in some Flemish schools and expressed the hope that other regions would follow suit. She wondered what was being done to ensure stronger enforcement of the law on female genital mutilation.

58. **Ms. Jahan** said that there appeared to be a number of impracticable requirements for victims of domestic violence to acquire residence permits, for example providing medical records and showing independent income sources. She wondered what was being done to ensure that the issuance of residence permits to victims of trafficking was not made conditional on their cooperation with the court authorities, as recommended by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

59. **Ms. Leinarte** asked whether the Government was giving any consideration to addressing demand for prostitution, given the link between such demand and trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

60. **Ms. Šimonović** asked whether the 24-hour helplines available at the regional level were also in place at the federal level. With regard to victims of sexual violence, she wondered whether there was any one-stop centre providing the full range of services required.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.